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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

CHRISTIANITY AND HISTORY

I. INTRODUCTION

THE great historians of antiquity were writers of modern history. Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Tacitus, were interested in what had happened because of what was happening, and great things were happening in their day. Herodotus writing, as he said, "in order that the great and wondrous deeds of both Greeks and barbarians may not be effaced by time" massed his facts around that world-stirring crisis which had just been passed, the Persian wars, Thucydides, persuaded that "former ages were not great either in their wars or in anything else," believed that the war that passed before his eyes was the greatest event in the world's history, and he bent his life's energies to describing it. Polybius, too, carried off to Rome in the track of her victorious armies, saw as a captive the miraculous dawn of that first empire of the Mediterranean world, and he wrote his history to explain it. "Who is so poor-spirited," he says, "or so indolent as not to want to know by what means the Romans in something less than fifty-three years subdued the world." Livy's vision was also always fastened upon the imperial present and the calm, clear-headed patriotism which had brought it about. Tacitus lacked this generous enthusiasm, but his interests were never antiquarian; the great age in which he lived drew his observation and supplied him with his task. From the clash of East and West in the Ionian cities in the sixth century B.C., whereby the critical curiosity of men and societies was first made active, to the tragic close of the drama of the ancient world, almost a thousand years later, history was centered upon the few great epochal events and the characters that dominated the world in which each writer lived.

But there was one event of supreme importance that had no Herodotus to gather up its priceless details, no Polybius to weld it into the world's history with scientific insight and critical acumen—the rise of Christianity.¹ The product of obscure enthusiasts in an

¹ Cf. V. Soden, *Das Interesse des Apostolischen Zeitalters in der Evangelischen Geschichte*, in *Theologische Abhandlungen*.

obscure and despised oriental people, it did not win more than a disdainful paragraph (in Tacitus) at the hands of pagan historians. Its own writings were but poor attempts at history compared with what other lesser events produced. When the scanty texts of the sayings and doings of Jesus were taking the shape in which we have them now, a Plutarch was writing biographies of all the pagan heroes. But no Christian Plutarch appeared for another three centuries; and then all that the learned Jerome was able to preserve for us was three or four paragraphs on the lives of the leading apostles.²

There were several reasons for this. In the first place Christianity began in a most humble way and among the unlettered. It did not burst out in a flame of conquest like Mohammedanism, but crept, half-hidden, along the foundations of society. Its very obscurity left little to chronicle. If it changed the lives of men, they were lives too insignificant to be noticed by history. Only in the present age, after democracy itself has learned to read and begun to think, is the historian awakening to the spiritual forces in the lives of the obscure. But even now we pay little attention to such seemingly extraneous elements as the beliefs of foreign immigrants settled in our city slums—the class that furnished the majority of the early converts to Christianity. In any case the Greco-Roman world troubled itself little about the history of the Jews and less still about that of the Christians.³

Even when Christianity had penetrated the society of the learned, moreover, it stimulated little historical investigation. Pagan savants, like Celsus,⁴ sometimes challenged the sources of Christian tradition and scripture,⁵ but for the most part the great controversy between Christian and pagan writers took place in fields that lay beyond the scope of history. Christianity was a religion, not a thing of politics, and although, as we shall see, the problem of fitting it into the Jewish and then into the gentile setting did involve historical conceptions, yet the main interests awakened by it were

² Jerome's *De Viris illustribus*, written after the model of Suetonius' *Viri illustres*.

³ The emphasis which subsequent ages has placed upon references to Judaism and Christianity in pagan writers has given those passages an altogether factitious prominence. There are at best only a very few, and those are mostly either incidental or pointed with ridicule. Cf. Th. Reinach, *Textes d'Auteurs grecs et romains relatifs au judaïsme, réunis, traduits et annotés* (1895); the opening sections of the monumental work of Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire romain, leur condition juridique, économique et sociale*, 2 vols., 1914. Emil Schürer's *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* (3 vols., 1901-1911, also in English translation) remains the standard work on the period. See also articles in the Jewish Encyclopædia dealing with the Diaspora.

⁴ See below.

⁵ As Apion did those of the Jews.

theological. This meant that history, as a record of mere human events, was bound to suffer; for the theology, in so far as it concerned itself with those events, sought to transfer them from the realm of human action to that of divine grace, and so to interpret the phenomena of time and change in terms of a timeless and unchanging Deity.⁶ The western world has since gratefully built its theology upon the conceptions so brilliantly worked out by the Fathers, and the historian whose business it is to register the judgments of society can not fail to appreciate their great formative influence in the history of thought. But their very success was a loss to history; for it placed the meaning of human effort outside the range of humanity, and so impressed upon the western world a fundamentally unhistorical attitude of mind.

The motive force which accomplished this theological victory was faith. Faith was the chief intellectual demand which Christianity made of its converts.⁷ By it the mind was enabled to view events in a perspective which reached beyond the limits of time and space into that imaginary over-world which we know as Eternity. Faith did more than remove mountains, it removed the whole material environment of life. There have been few such triumphs of the spirit as it achieved in those early days of the new religion. But the fact remains that this achievement was largely at the cost of history. Faith, one can see from the criticism of those first really conscious historians, the Ionian Greeks, is an impediment to genuine history, unless the imagination which it quickens is kept within control. The historian needs rather to confirm his imagination with skepticism and to be more upon his guard against believing whenever he feels the will to believe than at any other time—which, in the realm of religious virtues has generally been mistaken for a sin.⁸ Moreover, over and above the fact that faith puts a premium upon credulity,⁹ it indicates an absence of any real, serious interest in historical data. When one “takes a thing on faith,” it is because one is intent upon using it for something else of more importance—

⁶ It is significant to see how the conception of the essential unhistoricity of God, as a Being beyond the reach of change, has been growingly modified in modern times. The increase in the number of those mystics who have revised their theology in terms of modern science and philosophy (especially Bergsonian), is, from the standpoint of the history of pure thought, the most decisive triumph of the historical spirit. The Deity himself becomes historical; eternity disappears; all is time—and change.

⁷ Charity was hardly an intellectual virtue, at least as conceived by the Fathers.

⁸ There are all kinds of faith, to be sure. We are speaking only of religious faith, which transfers phenomena from the natural to the supernatural world and is, therefore, the chief opponent of rationalism.

⁹ As Celsus, the pagan critic, so cogently suggested.

so important, indeed, that often while still unrealized it can clothe with reality the very condition upon which it depends. Thus the "will to believe" can master phenomena in a way not permitted to historians. Faith and scientific history to not readily work together.

If this is clear in the dawn of Greek history, when science conquered faith, it stands out even more clearly still in that very antithesis of the creations of Hellas, which we may best term the gospel according to Paul.¹⁰ Nowhere else in the world's literature is there a call to faith like that of Paul, and few, even of the great creators of religious doctrine, have been more indifferent than he to the historical data, upon which, in the order of nature, that faith would seem to rest. The Apostle to the Gentiles cared little for the details of the life of Jesus, and boasted of his indifference.¹¹ He learned of the divinity of Christ by a flash of revelation which marked him out as one of the prophets. Then the desert, rather than Jerusalem, furnished him that tremendous plan of Christian doctrine upon which Christian orthodoxy still rests, which included the whole drama of humanity from the Creation and the Fall to the Redemption and the vision of its meaning, revealed on the road to Damascus. The plan was based upon the law and the prophets, but only because Paul's thought ran in terms of their teaching. His scheme was one that needed no verification from the sources even of sacred scripture, if once it could carry conviction by inner experience.¹²

Finally the faith of early Christianity was largely involved in a doctrine which centered attention not in this world but in the world to come; and the world to come was about to come at any moment. Immortality for the individual was a doctrine shared by other mystery religions of the pagan world; but only Christianity developed—out of the apocalyptic literature of the Jews—the vaster dream of an imminent cataclysm in which the world to come should come for all at once. While this doctrine appears in full force in Christian circles only from the latter part of the first to the middle of the second century, and was most developed in circles given over to what might be viewed, even by ecclesiastics, as extreme spirituality, it undoubtedly had a large and damaging influence upon Christian historiography. There is nothing which so effectively destroys our interest in the past as to live under the shadow of a great and impending event. It would not have been the same had each indi-

¹⁰ And we must regard Paul as the intellectual creator of Christian theology.

¹¹ Cf. the first, second and third chapters of Galatians.

¹² The Pauline doctrine involved a conceptual parallel to history, which apparently furnished a better past to the world, one more reasonable and more probable than that which actually had been the case.

vidual convert merely been keenly aware of the shortness of his own life and the vision of the coming day of judgment. That is still and has always been a perspective before religious minds; and however strange it may seem, it does not entirely kill the interest in the origin and evolution of these things which are so soon to vanish from before the eyes of death. Such is the vital instinct in us.¹³ But it is a different thing for heaven and earth and all mankind to pass away at once as these early Christians expected them to do at any time. A few years ago we were to pass through the tail of a comet and there was some speculation as to whether its deadly gases might not exterminate all life on this globe. Had the probability been more probable, had astronomers and men of science determined the fact by some experimental proof, with what breathless and hypnotic gaze we should have watched the measured coming of that star across the gulfs of space! Our vast, unresting industries would cease; for there would be no to-morrow to supply. Our discoveries in science, our creations in art would be like so many useless monuments in an untenanted world—and science and art would have no incentive to go on. The one interest for us all would be that growing point of light—that doom, swift, inevitable, universal. Here comes a problem in psychology. For as a matter of fact that same doom is coming; we know it with absolute certainty; we know there can be no escape. How many of those who saw that comet pass will be alive fifty years from now? In a century, at most, the earth will be the sepulcher of all—just as much a sepulcher as if the race had perished in one grand catastrophe. And what a little interval is a century! Yet our mills worked on, our discoveries continued, our art went on producing its visions of beauty; and above all, we increased our interest in the distant past, digging for history in the hills of Crete and Asia and working as never before to rescue and reconstruct the past from archives and libraries. Why? Because humanity is more to us than our individual lives; and the future is a reality through it. If humanity were to disappear and no future be possible we should lose our reckoning, along with our sense of values, like Browning's Lazarus, who has had a vision of eternity, but has lost track of time.

So it was in the millennial atmosphere of the early church. However vaguely or definitely the triumph of "the Kingdom" was

¹³ The influence of the belief in immortality upon historical perspectives invites our attention here; but the subject is too intricate for hurried consideration. Undoubtedly the emphasis upon a contrast between time and eternity obscured the understanding of the meaning of phenomena in their time-setting.

reckoned,¹⁴ the belief in its approach carried the mind away from earthly affairs and their history. Men who drew their inspiration from it had but little interest in the splendor of a Roman state or in the long procession of centuries in which were painfully evolved the institutions of pagan law and government, institutions which not only safeguarded the heritage of antique culture but made possible the extension of Christianity.

The only history of importance to the Christian was that which justified his faith, and it all lay within the sacred writings of the Jews. So, as the vision of the judgment day became fainter and the Church proceeded to settle itself in time and not in eternity it looked back to a different past from that which lay beyond the

¹⁴ The conception of a millennium, drawn from the later Jewish literature, was that Christ and his saints would rule for a thousand years; but in spite of much calculation the belief was never quite reduced to successful mathematics. It is interesting, in passing, to see how it drew upon that other interest in chronology, the plotting out of a future instead of a past, which astrology best illustrates. In fact the millennium may be said to be a sort of Christian equivalent for astrology. In the earlier prophets the Messianic Kingdom is to last forever (*cf. Ezekiel, 37:25, etc.*), a conception found also in the apostolic age (*John, 12:34*). Jeremiah, however, had risked a prophecy of Jewish delivery from captivity at the end of seventy years (*25:12*), but when his dream of deliverance was not realized the later prophets had to find an explanation, and apocalyptic literature developed a reckoning which should save the validity of the earlier. This was definitely the occasion of Daniel's attempt (chapter 9), which has taxed the mathematics of every apocalyptic dreamer to the present day. The conception of a thousand years came late, and perhaps rests on very extended use of symbolic interpretation. According to *Psalm 90:4*, a day with God is as a thousand years. Combine this with the six days of Creation in *Genesis* and by analogy the world's work will go on for six such days, or six thousand years, and then the Messiah will reign for a Sabbath of a thousand years. This idea is found only once in the *Talmud*. It was developed in detail, for Christians, in *Revelations* (*cf. 20:4*, "They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years"). Through Jewish and Christian apocalypses the doctrine was taken up, sometimes with, sometimes without, the mathematical data. By the middle of the second century it began to subside, and although Montanism in the early third century revived it, it was henceforth regarded as somewhat tinged with heresy and Judaism. In the learned circles, Neoplatonic mysticism, as taught by Origen, superseded the crudities of the millennistic faith. "It was only the chronologists and historians of the church who, following Julius Africanus, made use of apocalyptic numbers in their calculations, while court theologians like Eusebius entertained the imperial table with discussions as to whether the dining-hall of the emperor—the second David and Solomon, the beloved of God—might not be the new Jerusalem of John's *Apocalypse*." (A. Harnack, article "Millennium" in *Encyclopædia Britannica*. This article furnishes an admirable survey and bibliography. See the treatment of Christian eschatology in the various works of R. H. Charles in the field of apocalyptic literature.)

pagan world. The sacred scriptures of the Jews had replaced the literature of antiquity. A revolution was taking place in the history of history. Homer and Thucydides, Polybius and Livy, the glory of the old régime, shared a common fate. The scientific output of the most luminous minds the world had known was classed with the legends that had grown up by the campfires of primitive barbarians. All was pagan; which meant that all was delusive and unreliable except where it could be tested in the light of the new religion or where it forced itself by the needs of life into the world of common experience.

There is no more momentous revolution in the history of thought than this, in which the achievements of thinkers and workers, of artists, philosophers, poets and statesmen, were given up for the revelation of prophets and a gospel of worldly renunciation. The very success of the revolution blinds us to its significance; for our own world-view has been molded by it. Imagine, for instance, what the perspectives of history would have been had there been no Christianity, or if it had remained merely a sect of Judaism, to be ignored or scorned! Religion carried history away from the central themes of antiquity to a nation that had little to offer—except the religion.

The story of Israel could not, from the very nature of its situation, be more than an incident in the drama of nations. The great empires of the east lay on either side of it, and the land of promise turned out to be a pathway of conquering armies. From the desert beyond Jordan new migrations of Semite nomads moved in for the plunder of the Jews as the Jews themselves had plundered the land before. On the west Philistine and Phoenician held the harbors and the sea. Too small a nation for a career of its own, exposed and yet secluded, the borderer of civilization, Israel could produce no rich culture like its more fortunately situated neighbors. When unmolested for a time, it too could achieve rapid progress in its fortress towns. But no sooner was its wealth a temptation than the Assyrian was at the gates. It is small wonder, then, if in spite of the excellence of much of the historical literature embedded in the Old Testament, even the best of it, such as the stories woven around the great days of Saul and David, when compared with the narrative of Polybius or even with that of Herodotus leaves the picture of petty kinglets of an isolated tribe, reaching out for a brief interval to touch the splendors of Tyre and Sidon, and vaguely aware of the might and wealth of Egypt.

The one contribution of the Jews to the world was in a field which offers history few events to chronicle. As we have insisted above, it was a contribution of the first magnitude, to be treasured by succeeding ages above all the arts and sciences of antiquity. But

its very superiority lay in its unworldliness, in its indifference to the passing fortunes of man or nations, which make up the theme of history. This at least was the side of Judaism which Christianity seized upon and emphasized. But there could be little for history in any case in a religion born of national disaster and speaking by revelation. The religion which is born of disaster must either falsify realities by a faith which reads victory in defeat—like the inspiration of Mahomet fleeing on his camel from the victorious unbelievers, yet chanting, “Who hath given us the victory!” Or it must take refuge in the realm of the spirit, where the triumphs of the world, its enemy, are met with indifference or scorn. In either case the perspective is distorted. Revelation may save the future by stirring hope and awakening confidence; but it will falsify the past with the same calm authority as it dictates the conduct of the present—falsify, that is, in the eyes of science. In its own eyes it is lord of circumstance and master of phenomena, and the records of the centuries must come to its standards, not it to theirs.

It was, therefore, a calamity, for historiography, that the new standards won the day. The authority of a revealed religion sanctioned but one scheme of history through the vast and intricate evolution of the antique world. A well-nigh insurmountable obstacle was erected to scientific inquiry, one which has at least taken almost nineteen centuries to surmount.

Not only was the perspective perverted, and the perversion made into a creed, but the stern requirements of monotheistic theology placed a veritable barrier against the investigation. The Christian historian was not free to question the data as presented to him, since the source was inspired. He might sometimes evade the difficulty by reading new meanings into the data and so square them with the rest of history, a device employed by every Father of the church whose erudition and insight brought him face to face with the difficulties of literal acceptance of the scriptures. But however one might twist the texts, the essential outlines of the scheme of history remained fixed. From the prophets of Jahve with their high fanaticism and from Paul, the prophet of Jesus, there was but one world-view, that dominated by the idea of a chosen people and a special dispensation. The only difference between Christian and Jewish outlook was that what had been present politics became past history. The apostle to the Gentiles did not give up the Jewish past. Pre-Christian history was in his eyes the same narrow story of exclusive providence as it was in the eyes of the older prophets. Gentiles had had no share in the dispensations of Jahve; it was only for the present and future that they might hope to enter into the

essential processes of historical evolution. The past to Paul was what it was to a Pharisee.

This exclusive attitude of Christianity with reference to the past was in striking contrast with the attitude of contemporaneous paganism, which was growingly liberal with increasing knowledge. To attack the story of Jahve's governance of the world was, for a Christian, sacrilege, since the story itself was sacred. A pagan, with a whole pantheon to turn to, placed no such value upon any one myth and therefore was free to discount them all. His eternal salvation did not rest upon his belief in them; and, moreover, he did not concern himself so much about his salvation in any case. When the belief in an immortality was bound up with the acceptance of a scheme of history, the acceptance was assured. What is the dead past of other people's lives, when compared with the unending future of one's own? History yielded to the demands of eternity.

Moreover in its emphasis upon the Messiahship of Jesus, Christianity fastened upon one of the most exclusive aspects of Jewish thought. Such history as the proof of this claim involved was along the line of a narrow, fanatic, national movement. Christianity, it is true, opened the Messianic Kingdom to the whole world, but it justified its confidence in the future by an appeal to the stricter outlines of a tribal faith in the past. And yet that appeal, in spite of its limitations, was the source of such historical research as Christianity produced. For, when pressed by pagan critics to reconcile their claims with those of Greeks or Egyptians, the Fathers were obliged to work out not merely a theory of history—their theology supplied them with that—but a scheme of chronology. The simple problem, so lightly attacked, as to whether Moses or the Greeks should have the priority as lawgiver forced the apologists to some study of comparative history. While in this particular issue they had a somewhat easy triumph,¹⁵ there was a danger, which is obvious to us now, in too much reliance upon the chronology of the Old Testament, and especially in placing an emphasis upon the literal text. The trenchant criticism of their opponents, therefore, led the fathers to adopt that allegorical type of interpretation, which they learned from the Greeks themselves, and which is so useful wherever there is a need for holding fast to a text while letting the meaning go. We shall therefore find the chief developments of Christian historiography during the first three centuries following these two lines, of

¹⁵ One of the earliest and best short statements of this claim is that made by Tatian in his *Address to the Greeks*, chapter 31 ff. It is strikingly in line with Josephus's protest in *Against Apion*.

allegory and symbolism on the one hand and of comparative chronology on the other.

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(*To be continued.*)

SOCIETIES

THE NINETEENTH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION

PHILOSOPHY IN THE MAKING

TO those who gathered at Ithaca for philosophical disputation during the closing days of December, any retrospective account of the proceedings is bound to appear inadequate; while for the many to whom zero weather and remoteness of place proved insuperable barriers nothing in the way of a mere summary of events could possibly communicate more than a vague notion of what was missed. Not that the arguments of the papers read were unreproducible, nor that the more notable of the attractions of our brief and wintry sojourn at Cornell University were so vaporous as to admit of no description. The difficulty of doing justice to the nineteenth annual meeting of American philosophers is due to the fact that this year as in many previous years not the least of the inspiration and pleasure came from impromptu speeches, witty repartee, chance remarks uttered at luncheon or in intermissions, or in the glow of the blazing log fires lighted in Prudence Risley Hall after dinner. Such effervescences of humor and spontaneity and keenness are impossible now to recapture. Easier, almost, would it be to bring back to life the flames of those same log fires or the smiles and words of greeting with which old friends and cordial acquaintances rejoined to commune for a short while upon problems as ancient as the first Platonists and as well adapted as in their day to the fostering of a peculiar degree of good fellowship. The kind of thing one might recall—though without thereby reinstating the whole rich context—is the circumstance that Miss Follett called Professor Sheldon sentimental; that Professor Urban accused Professor Cohen of talking about *bona fide* ghosts; that Professor Cohen scored against his opponents by an invidious analogy with the Almighty; that Professor Crookes in correction of Professor Montague attributed pain to Erin rather than to the individual Irish-